7 MAY 2023

The Observer Magazine

‘It’s just me… and eight million listeners’

Vernon Kay has inherited the biggest show in radio. Can he keep it on track?

Losing its lustre
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The Observer Magazine

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Siân Anna Lewis is a travel writer whose work has appeared in titles such as *Lonely Planet*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *BBC Countryfile Magazine*. Her blog, The Girl Outdoors, has won multiple awards. Read her inspiring roundup of the wildest places to stay in the UK (p32).

Portrait photographer and road trip enthusiast **Benedict Evans** was born in Bristol and is now based in Brooklyn, where he shoots some of the best-known celebrities and stars. 'Often,' he says, 'my favourite picture from a sitting is the one I never thought I'd be taking when I woke up that morning.' See his stunning shots of the writer Zahra Hankir (p12).

Lebanese-British journalist **Zahra Hankir** writes about culture and community. Her first book, *Our Women on the Ground: Essays by Arab Women Reporting from the Arab World*, was published in 2019. Her second, *Eyeliner: A Cultural History*, is out in November. Here, she tackles the cultural, political and health implications of getting your nails done (p12).

The Observer Magazine
'It's just me... and eight million listeners'

**The Observer Magazine,
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90 York Way,
London N1 9GU
(020 3353 2000)
magazine@observer.co.uk**
Printed at Walstead Roche, Victoria Business Park, Roche, Victoria, St Austell PL26 8LX

Cover image **Dean Chalkley**

COVER: JACKET BY OLIVERSPENCER.CO.UK; JUMPER BY RALPHLAUREN.CO.UK; TROUSERS BY SLOWEAR.COM; TRAINERS BY SUPERGA.CO.UK; GROOMING BY TARA HICKMAN

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Eva Wiseman

Rom-cons are rife, but it's not just the cash that makes love hurt

@evawiseman

It was always going to be love, wasn't it, that would get us in the end? A sharp swipe from the right, the final boss. I read on *Refinery29* about Sarah, 23, who met Tom on a gaming app in the summer of 2020 and started, she says, to "like him a lot". This was in the early months of lockdown, during those hot, grim days when police patrolled the parks. A few months into their online relationship, Tom admitted he was struggling to buy food and Sarah started sending him money, because she liked him and she didn't want him to starve. Jobs had dissolved overnight, people were reselling dumbbells for five times the price – everybody was trying to survive.

When Sarah told her friends she'd been giving him cash – around £400 – they decided to investigate and discovered there was no Tom. Instead, the person attached to his email address was a young woman, the same age as Sarah. She was devastated; Sarah was not the only one. This is romance fraud or, rather snappily, "rom-con", a crime that's rising due to the cost-of-living crisis. Official figures show almost £90m was lost to romance scams last year, but it's believed to be much higher. The *Refinery29* piece describes how scam attempts have increased by 60% in the past six months. This kind of fraud has traditionally been associated with older women, but now everybody's at risk: 51% of people aged 21 to 30 say they have seen a rise in the number of suspicious messages received on dating sites. ITV reported that Santander has launched a specialist division to combat rom-cons: the Break the Spell team works to "interrupt" customers who have been identified as being at high risk, stepping in when the person could be about to send large amounts of cash. To stop, in the name of love. Sorry.

There are some scams that make me think, well, fair enough. Like the other day when I went online to buy a book and a bookshop I'd never heard of was advertising it for half the price of everywhere else. It wasn't until I'd input two different credit cards and my phone number that it started to dawn on me, perhaps my stinginess had stung me. I deserved that. But other scams, like elder fraud, or this, a con that relies on a person's emotional goodwill, feel horribly wrong. Losing money seems almost the least of it – it's the betrayal that does the deepest damage. A small death happens, the loss of someone the conned person loved, shared secrets with, intimacies, who she sat up late with and talked about her childhood and dreams. That experience – discovering the person you loved does not exist, was created in fact, to manipulate you – must leave a person feeling shamed and terribly alone.

I was reminded, reading about rom-cons, of a recent study into why women freeze their eggs. Anthropologist Marcia C Inhorn spent 10 years on her research, concluding that the biggest driving factor was a shortage of suitable educated men, a problem she calls the "mating gap". The women she spoke to were after, understandably, "an egalitarian relationship", which became a problem when the men they wanted to have children with were intimidated by their success. "Some women resorted to toning down their educational achievements on their dating app profiles to avoid putting men off," reported the *Observer* in April. "Sometimes men would joke or insult them about their jobs or say, 'You're smarter than I am, I can't go out with you,'" said Inhorn. "Really blatant kinds of misogyny and discrimination." As a woman with single friends of reproductive age, this rang some fairly irritating bells.

The bells continued, as the more I thought about the rise of rom-cons within the revelation of a mating gap, the more starkly I became aware of the various emotional manipulations still deemed culturally acceptable when dating. Pretending to your online girlfriend that you need £400 for food? Shocking. Pretending to your less-educated boyfriend that you don't understand economic policy? Attractive. Pretending to your 35-year-old girlfriend that you think you'll probably be ready for a baby in two, maybe three years' time? Standard. It's not the same as lying for cash in an online relationship, of course it's not, but lying for time, or intimacy, or lying out of shame in a relationship is such an unexceptional aspect of dating that it's useful to pinpoint the reasons the lie of a rom-con remains so upsetting, then work back from there to identify the differences and similarities between that and more commonplace manipulations of trust.

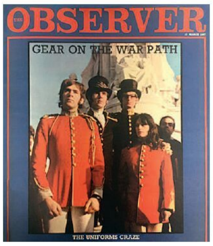
It's no wonder perhaps, that "intentional celibacy" has become a trend. How does anybody manage to invest in a relationship at all today, when you have to keep your guard up to avoid being scammed while also opening yourself up to let somebody get to know you? When you have to seduce and impress a person, while also blurring the edges of your success to avoid being intimidating, a Twister-like contortion, backwards in heels. How are we expected to survive in a cost-of-living crisis, when a cost-of-loving crisis has been raging for years? ■

One more thing…

The last episode of ***Beef***, a revenge tragedy on Netflix starring Ali Wong and Steven Yeun, was cathartic, shocking and beautiful. If you haven't seen the ending I won't spoil it for you, but also, what on earth are you waiting for?

New York Magazine looks back at a century of It girls, including Edie Sedgwick, Grace Jones and Chloë Sevigny. My favourite quote is from model Jenny Shimizu, who saw Linda Evangelista at a shoot repeating, '**I am Linda Evangelista**,' into the mirror, and promptly nicked her mantra. 'I look in the mirror and say, "I am Linda Evangelista." And then I kill it. And that's how I got the Prada campaign.'

I'm looking forward to visiting the **Hilma af Klint** (and Mondrian) show at Tate Modern. Seeing her work at the Guggenheim in New York (her first solo show in America – 75 years after her death) was the most glorious and hallucinatory art experience of my life.



OBSERVER

GEAR ON THE WAR PATH

THE UNIFORMS CRAZE

From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

Less than three months before *Sgt Pepper* was released, on 12 March 1967, the *Observer* took a bemused look at the craze for military uniforms. 'Pop patriotics? Dandyism? Consolation for having missed National Service?' There was plenty of brocade and brass in the pictures, in which 'very pale young men' (and the occasional woman) struck fey or faintly confrontational poses.

Interrogated about what it all meant, military fashion purveyor 26-year-old Ian Fisk of Portobello Road boutique I Was Lord Kitchener's Valet, responded laconically. He didn't know where the craze came from, wouldn't reveal where he got his stock and, 'What next? He doesn't care.'

His customers were slightly more forthcoming. 'I wouldn't mind if I found a bullet hole,' said one. 'They look good on us, so what?' said another. Asked where they wouldn't wear uniform, suggestions included, 'Aldershot, Sandhurst. No point in inviting someone to punch you' and 'within a mile of my mother'.

Fisk, who had recently opened a second store in Soho, was selling uniforms for around 10 guineas. Some adjustments were necessary because it was still a criminal offence to impersonate a member of the armed forces. Mazin Zeki, 18, of Muswell Hill, had been prosecuted for that (his defence? 'It's fashionable and smart.') Other modifications were purely for the purposes of fabulousness.

Some experts were willing to advance theories about why dressing to kill had become so popular. The editor of *Tailor and Cutter* magazine saw a yearning for adventure. 'They've got the same feeling for the heroic and dramatic as any other generation… a uniform satisfies just that.' The manager of an army surplus store saw things more prosaically. 'The clothes are cheap, warm and practical and the trousers have lots of pockets to put things in. It's no more subtle than that.' ***Emma Beddington***

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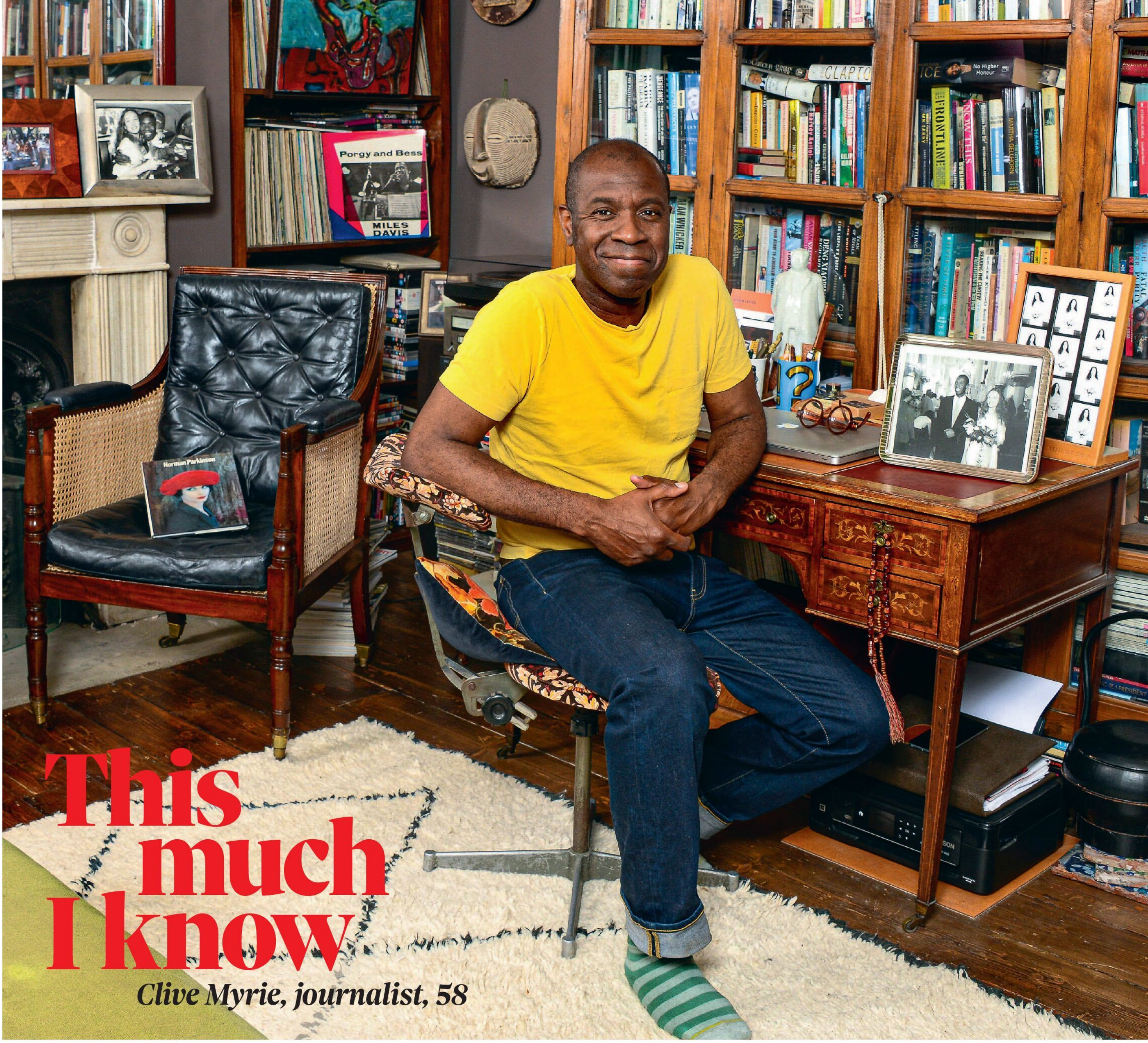

This much I know

Clive Myrie, journalist, 58

ANL/ SHUTTERSTOCK

Interview **MICHAEL SEGALOV**

On my first day at primary school I threw up in the middle of the classroom. It was nerves, I think – being away from family. For the following two weeks I was totally mute. Eventually I spoke – and haven't stopped since.

My parents arrived in Bolton from Jamaica in the early 1960s with my older siblings. I was their first to be born here. It was a loving family, but Dad didn't adapt well to the UK. It was cold and the northern industrial town was alien to the Caribbean countryside he knew. His way of coping was to work, work, work. He did it all for his children.

Journalism was always on the cards for me. I had a paper round and after every shift devoured my own product. In the evenings, I'd watch documentaries. Then I saw Sir Trevor McDonald on ITV. A man who looked like me in the job? I knew it was possible.

I studied law and had a place to become a barrister. It's what my Windrush-generation parents wanted. But I was also accepted on to the BBC training scheme. Parental forgiveness took a while. TV appearances helped. Reading the news, more so. Then I got the *Mastermind* gig – and all was finally forgiven.

My wife would say I'm a hoarder, though I'd dispute that. It's just that I have old newspapers from the late 90s, and constantly collect all sorts of bits: candles, hotel soaps, ashtrays…

American presidents have an aura of power. It's not from the individual, but all the secret service, staff and fussing around. I felt that around Clinton, Bush and Obama… but funnily enough not with Donald Trump.

Reporting on disasters, violence and war is tough. For many, PTSD is a real struggle. I know it might hit me one day. Certain images lives with you forever, but I compartmentalise and rarely keep track of the news when I'm not working. The separation is important, even if memories bleed through.

US presidents have an aura of power. I felt that around Clinton, Bush and Obama… but not with Trump

Anything slithery or slimy can stay away from me. Very weird. Very.

Due impartiality isn't a struggle for me. I have views on everything, but the point is that when I walk into the BBC you don't know them. Still, it means giving arguments the weight they deserve. If 99% of scientists say the climate crisis is manmade, I won't put the 1% on the telly.

In the words of Michael Caine, separate bathrooms make a marriage. Figuratively speaking, at least. My wife has her own interests. I do, too.

I cry a lot. I'm a real gusher. Soppy movie? Great injustice? Man City winning? That's me gone. ■

Clive Myrie's Italian Roadtrip runs on weekdays on BBC Two at 6.30pm. All episodes are available on iPlayer

Blue note: Vernon Kay wears jumper by Loewe (mytheresa.com). Facing page: jacket by oliverspencer.co.uk; jumper by ralphlauren.co.uk; trousers by slowear.com, and trainers by superga.co.uk

In the hot seat

As Vernon Kay takes the mic of the biggest job in radio, he talks to Tim Lewis about working-class pride, advice from Bruce Forsyth – and the one item that's still on his achievement wish list...

Vernon Kay is trying to explain what it will be like to present the most popular radio show in Europe. We are in studio 6A, on the sixth floor of the BBC's Wogan House in central London. Outside the room is a Yamaha DC7 piano donated by Elton John in 2010, and recently tinkled by Benny from Abba and Fleetwood Mac's Christine McVie, and a loo that is reserved for Radio 2's star presenters, who can quickly nip in there while a song is playing. In the studio, Kay jumps up and takes two long strides to a mixing desk. It's a messy jumble of monitors, buttons and lights that looks – to the inexpert eye – like the cockpit of a basic aeroplane.

"Let's say you're my producer and there's two of us in the studio," he role-plays. "It's pre-show and we're just chewing the fat: 'What did you do last night? Blah, blah, blah.' And I'm sitting here, looking at the clock and the fader is down, right? So there's two of us. Then all of a sudden, when you do this..." Kay pushes a yellow slider knob, which controls the microphone, to the open position. "Now you are live to 8.4 million people. It's the most bizarre experience ever." He continues to slide the knob up and down, almost lost in a daydream: "Just us two... Eight million... Us two... Eight million... Us two... Eight million."

From Monday 15 May, Kay will be spending a lot of time in Studio 6A. In February, it was announced the 49-year-old would be the new presenter of Radio 2's midmorning weekday show, taking over the 9.30am-to-midday slot from the beloved Ken Bruce, who left the station after 31 years for Bauer's Greatest Hits Radio. The news was hardly a tea-spitter: since 2021, Kay has been Radio 2's super sub, the first-choice stand-in for when regular hosts went on their hols. He has a familiar, approachable style – honed over the years on Radio 1 and Radio X – and has the ability, as he often notes, to talk and talk and talk.

But still, the gig is clearly the most high-profile of his career on radio and TV, which stretches back more than 20 years and includes long stints on *T4* and *All Star Family Fortunes*, and truncated ones on shows such as *Beat the Star* and *Splash!* During Ken Bruce's decades in the job, he turned the midmorning slot from an Alan Partridge punchline ›

Photographs **DEAN CHALKLEY** *Fashion editor* **JO JONES**

Born in Damascus

After 10 years apart, a Scottish-Syrian filmmaker reconnects with her closest cousin. Once, they were very similar, but the war in Syria has splintered their lives, sending them down very different paths. In this moving documentary with intimate family video archive, the cousins piece together their memories of Syria as it once was, and reflect on how war continues to affect every relationship long after it ends.

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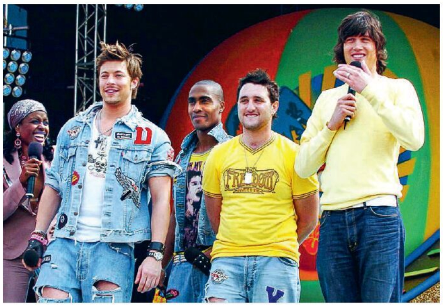

Star turn: (from top) in the Radio 2 studio; with Mo Farah on I'm a Celebrity; with fellow T4 presenter June Sarpong and Blue in 2004; with wife Tess Daly

PREVIOUS PAGES: GROOMING BY TARA HICKMAN; PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT JOMILE KAZLAUSKAITE; FASHION ASSISTANT ROZ DONOGHUE. THIS PAGE: JAMES WATKINS/BBC; SHUTTERSTOCK; MIRRORPIX/ALAMY; WIREIMAGE

› into the prime real estate of British radio, overtaking all of the breakfast shows and becoming – as Kay alluded to earlier – top dog in not only the UK, but all of Europe.

So, no pressure then? Kay slightly swerves the question. "Everyone's saying to me, 'Just be yourself,'" he replies. "I can't put the mic up and pretend to know everything about every artist we're playing, because I'm not that type of person. But I will say, 'What is everyone doing right now? How are people going about their daily lives?' Coming from a Northern working-class family… It's a sweeping statement, but I think it's easier to connect with what people are doing. My dad's a lorry driver, didn't really see that much of him, up and down the road, proper grafting, to give me and my brother a good living. My mum worked in a department store and she did exactly the same.

"My first ever job at 14 was putting stickers on boxes of bananas at a ripening factory," Kay goes on. "I was a caretaker. I used to clean phone boxes. I've done all kinds of jobs where you meet all kinds of people. And I think it's nice to just be one of them. Because I am one of them."

Kay, who is married to the *Strictly Come Dancing*'s Tess Daly, with whom he has two teenage daughters, begins to well up as he thinks of what lies ahead. He dabs tears from his eyes. "Yeah, it's massive," he says. "Absolutely. Massive. It doesn't get any bigger. But also for me, Tess and the kids. It's mega and it comes with a lot of responsibility. So yeah, it means an awful lot. It really does."

Twirl the dial to Radio 2 these days and, if you are a Gen Xer, you're likely to feel a powerful throwback to the period either side of the millennium. In recent years, a number of long-standing presenters have either moved on or been gently nudged: Steve Wright, Simon Mayo, Chris Evans and Ken Bruce, among them. In their place, the station has filled the most high-profile slots with faces and voices who made their breakthrough in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Enter Zoë Ball, Sara Cox and Kay: reformed Ibiza stalwarts who now have children and lived experience.

Kay's break came as a model, but not in the way it usually happens. He was scouted in his early 20s at *BBC Clothes Show Live* in Birmingham by an agent from Select. The agent convinced him to quit his job in his cousin's DIY store in Bolton, which wasn't a tough sell admittedly, and a week later Kay had moved to a flat in Peckham Rye, southeast London, that he shared with two other wannabes. One day he was flicking through *GQ* magazine when he came across an interview with the actor Ashton Kutcher. In it, Kutcher said he had written a private list of 10 things he wanted to achieve by the age of 40. Kay decided to do the same.

Even now, having ticked off nine items, Kay is reluctant to reveal the details of what ambitions were on the list. But a move into TV was one. That started when he was picked for a fly-on-the-wall ITV documentary, *Babewatch*, which followed aspirational models. This led to doing vox pops on a Play UK show called *The Phone Zone* and then in 2000, at 26, to presenting Channel 4's *T4*, which he did for five years.

"Making a list really works," says Kay, who is tall and strapping, with buoyant hair and gleaming teeth (which, according to legend, he brushes four times a day). "The secret is about really focusing on something so that your whole energy is about going and grabbing it. And that's what I did. When I interviewed Ashton Kutcher for *T4* I went, 'Oh, you've got your list. I've done the same, because I read your interview.' And we had a chat about that. About manifesting."

Another item on the list was getting married. He and Daly were models, but never crossed paths: "I was only doing really lame stuff and she was all over the world." But Daly also wanted to break into TV and ended up doing Kay's vox-pop job when he moved to *T4*. They met at a Christmas party in 2001 and married two years later. "I fell in love with Tess instantly," he says. "It was that simple. Just boom, wow! She's a woman, an independent woman. That's what was so attractive and even to this day what I find extremely attractive is that she is focused and driven. Which is fab, but then when you watch her with the kids…" Kay puffs out his cheeks, "She's unbelievable."

Kay and Daly's eldest, Phoebe, is now 18; she was born not long after Daly started as co-presenter with Bruce Forsyth on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Their younger daughter, Amber, is 13. "Some people choose to have kids later on to see whether they can establish themselves, not necessarily in media, but in any career," says Kay. "For us, it just felt natural. Both my parents and Tess's parents – Tess's father, sadly, passed away on our honeymoon – were together for a long time, and had kids quite early in their marriages. That was a big influence for us."

When Phoebe was born, they moved from London to Buckinghamshire, where they still are. Kay smiles, "Noel Gallagher lived in Chalfont St Peter and he used to say: 'It's close enough that you can get to an emergency meeting, but also far enough away that no one comes and visits you.'"

Kay and Daly's relationship has had its complications – in 2010, he became tabloid fodder after admitting to exchanging compromising messages with a glamour model – but in September it's their 20th anniversary. "There's something planned, I can't say what," he says. "But after 20 years, you need some personal time, don't you? Nice glass of wine, nice dinner, good conversation, reflection, moving forward, all that stuff. It can only be positive. I feel really content and happy at home, happy at work."

'I fell in love with Tess instantly. It was that simple. Just boom, wow!'

As for the list, what's the final ambition? Kay shakes his head, "To sit down with you! No, no, sorry! It's in the distant future, but it's coming. I can feel it."

While Daly's career has been notable for its long association with one show, Kay's has been more peripatetic. He loved working on *T4* and was crushed when he was told in 2005, at 31, that Steve Jones was taking over. "Oh, no, *T4* wasn't a choice," says Kay. "I would have happily signed another contract. God, yeah." It was a similar story at Radio 1, where he presented a weekend show for eight years. "I remember as clear as day when I got the call saying they weren't going to extend my contract. And that's because I was 37 at the time. But I get it. It's some of the most complimentary trolling I've ever had."

A happier turning point came when he agreed to go on ITV's *I'm a Celebrity… Get Me Out of Here!* in 2020. "I'd been asked to go on loads before," says Kay, "and it was primarily because the kids are a bit older. Phoebe in particular watched it and loved the Harry Redknapp series, which was a couple before mine, I think. So when I told her she was like, 'You've got to do it! Please do it!'"

So Kay's children have taken the place of his agent now? "Haha, they're not getting 15%," he shoots back.

It turned out to be a good call from Phoebe. The 2020 series, which took place in Wales rather than Australia because of the pandemic, and was broadcast during the second national lockdown in the UK, was one of the most popular in the show's history, with ratings that peaked at more than 14m. Kay, who came across as genuine and unfussy, eventually placed third behind Radio 1 DJ Jordan "Happy Place" North and the author and podcaster Giovanna Fletcher. "Going on *I'm a Celeb*," says Kay, "and just being me and having a laugh and enjoying myself, I won't say it was an eye-opener, but it made people go, 'Oh yeah, he's all right, him.' And that was it, really.

"Two days after I came out, I had an ITV meeting," he continues, sipping his tea. "Because you can't escape audience research these days. It's everywhere. ITV had a show lined up for me: *Game of Talents*. And I was like, 'Yeah, great, do it, back on a shiny floor, bit of jazz hands!'"

Alas, *Game of Talents* only lasted one season, but Kay was back on the map. The shifts on Radio 2 started rolling in, serving as another reminder of what an adept and likable front man he could be. This is very much his game plan for the midmorning slot: keeping much of the Ken Bruce DNA, but throwing in some of his "Northerner, two lattes in" energy. "It's a case of if it ain't broke, don't try and fix it," he says.

Kay is known for his love of dance music, but he has no plans to inflict that on his audience. "I've had loads of people tweet me, 'Oh, please don't be 24/7 dance music,'" he says. "And I'm like, 'No, no, no…' They think I'm going to turn up with a pair of Technics 1210 [turntables] and a box of vinyl: 'Here's some Sven Väth for you, ladies and gentlemen.' It's not going to be that, don't worry. When I first met Bruce Forsyth, via Tess, he gave me a brilliant piece of advice. He said, 'It's called show business: show business is two words. Let them deal with the business. You deal with the show. If you do a great show, great business will come. If you do a bad show, it'll be bad business. Don't join the two.' Never a truer word said from the great man."

Experience tells Kay he needs to take his listeners on the ride with him, and if he does that maybe he'll keep going for three decades, like Ken Bruce. If he doesn't… "Well, you do realise I'm 50 next year," Kay says. "It's just evolution and I don't think you can stop that. It's always been going on and it will always go on. There'll be a day when I guess I'll get a phone call to say, 'Right, let's move on.'"

When Kay's 80? His booming laugh fills the studio: "Fingers crossed!" ■

Vernon Kay is on BBC Radio 2 weekdays between 9.30am and 12 noon, and on BBC Sounds from 15 May

'If my nails are without polish, something is amiss in my personal life': Zahra Hankir

More than just nails

Last month's news that gel nails could trigger a life-changing allergy had women looking with concern at the ends of their brightly painted fingers. Zahra Hankir goes beneath the glossy surface of her manicure – and reveals how nail polish became political

Photographs **BENEDICT EVANS**

I was on a second date in a dimly lit Italian restaurant in Brooklyn when one of my false nails flew off my left hand and settled into my ravioli. We were one drink in and mid-conversation when I rested the hand in question on my knee, using the other to stealthily bury the evidence. After a short pause, the conversation continued, awkwardly moving on to siblings. Had he noticed? Was the lighting that soft?

This was the aesthetic blip I'd been dreading. The unexpected flinging-of-nail moment that had sworn so many people before me off press-ons; the date equivalent of Janet Jackson's Super Bowl nip slip. My nail bed was a sorry sight: short and scuffed next to pristine, almond-shaped French tips. I'd quite literally been exposed. My false nails had been a safety blanket for my hands. They ensured I looked put together and polished. And they gave me edge, silently declaring that I was, as per a nail polish ad painted by Salvador Dalí that features beautifully manicured hands, the *Portrait of a Passionate Woman*.

Mine was not an effortless look. I hadn't woken up like this: my hair had been blown out; my folds neatly tucked away; the shape of my eyes manipulated with winged eyeliner. The naked nail reminded me of all that lay beneath; it revealed my existential dread – and my battered cuticle.

That said, as a resourceful Lebanese woman, I was prepared. I'd made a habit of stealthily carrying around a set of nails in my purse, along with nail glue. I politely excused myself and hurriedly applied a new nail. There was no nightcap; I never saw the man again. To this day, I wonder if my mishap is a story he tells his mates. Unfortunate date anecdotes aside, nails are important. They are signifiers of our vanity and our insecurities, of self-expression and creativity, and even of violence and aggression. Nails are a site of politics and paranoia and of the convergence between class and culture and, currently, they are the subject of a news story causing anxiety across the salons and offices of Britain.

Before exploring the world of press-on nails, which I indulged in during the pandemic, when beauty salons had shuttered, I was a gel-advocate. Gel nail polish can last for up to three weeks at a time without peeling or chipping; vintage nail polish isn't nearly as durable and seemed to me to be a thing of the cuticle community's past. So, every month, I'd head to my local, experimenting with a multitude of colours. I ignored the weird tingly feeling or shots of pain while the varnish dried in 30-second intervals under an ultraviolet light machine. Beauty is suffering, I'd think to myself as I handed over my £30.

A study in *Nature Communications* in January found that exposure to UV light via nail dryers can cause mutations in DNA and damage to cells that may lead to cancer. These machines are essentially mini sun-tanning beds for your hands – UV light penetrates deep into the dermis; gel nail dryers use 340 to 395 nanometers of light, compared with 280 to 400 in tanning beds.

The intensity of the exposure continues to be a cause for concern, according to Dr Julia Curtis of the University of Utah's dermatology department. "In a short period, the ›

'Manicures sit at the intersection of class, gender, power and race; nail polish is far more than makeup – it can be political': Zahra Hankir

› nails and skin are exposed to UV light commensurate with an eight-hour day in the sun," she tells me. One way to avoid this would be to avoid having your nails painted, but tell that to someone like Cardi B, who wore impossibly long silver acrylics while completing community service in February. The rapper last year even posted a tutorial on how to change nappies without spoiling one's manicure.

Last month, the UK Office for Product Safety and Standards said it was investigating life-altering allergies caused by gel and acrylics, a worrying trend that Curtis has also observed. If gel polish isn't sufficiently cured, methacrylates can leak into the skin and cause irritation. People can then become sensitive to materials containing acrylates; for some, this has meant they can't have certain medical treatments, such as joint replacement surgery, or take specific medications, including for diabetes.

"We frequently see people with allergic contact dermatitis to acrylics and gel nails," Curtis says. The allergies manifest as a rash and peeling around the fingertips; some even experience eyelid dermatitis due to rubbing their faces. "There are times where I try to engage my patients' vanity by telling them the short-term benefits of looking good aren't worth it," she adds. "It's not just cancer and wrinkles that people should consider, but also pigment changes, skin thinning and lesions."

After moving to New York from London in 2021, I entered a new era of nail exploration and grooming habits. Acrylics and false nails are seemingly more common among millennials and zoomers in America, where salons prize speed over luxury. New Yorkers prefer longer nails, with elaborate art, while Londoners are generally lower-key with their manicures. And so I graduated from gel and press-ons to acrylics, which were far bolder and usually also involved exposure to UV light.

I hadn't realised the long-term damage these machines could cause until I stumbled upon a beauty influencer's TikTok that advised people getting gel manicures to use sunblock on their fingers to prevent hand wrinkles. More serious potential ailments weren't mentioned. DNA mutations? Bad. Wrinkled hands? Worse.

"I wear sunscreen on my hands when I get my nails done," says Chelsea Asher, 31, a Brighton-based tech worker. While she understands there may still be some risks when getting manicures, even with sunscreen, she's undeterred, as to her, the rewards of a fresh set go far beyond the physical. "As a woman with alopecia, having beautiful nails is affirming for me when it comes to my femininity," she says. "Getting my nails done means an uninterrupted hour of me-time."

Growing up in an unstable political and socio-economic environment in Lebanon, I personally treated grooming as the highest form of self-care. I started getting manicures and my eyebrows shaped at just 14; if my eyes were without kohl, or my nails without lacquer, something was surely amiss in my personal life.

Over the centuries, across cultures and continents, nail painting has been integral to beautification. Ancient Babylonians created the first manicure set: its tools were made from gold, male warriors in the region were said to paint their nails before combat to startle their enemies. Ancient Egyptians dipped their fingertips in henna and gilded their nails. Henna was also used to embellish nails in ancient China. Later, men and women of the Ming dynasty prettified their nails by soaking them in a mixture of wax, natural dyes, egg whites and other materials. Kathakali dancers in the Indian state of Kerala still use metallics for long, curved artificial nails; their striking presentation is particularly important as basic hand gestures in kathakali, known as mudras, assist with storytelling.

During Persia's Qajar period, court women incorporated nail painting into their self-care routines. They applied henna to their nails and sormeh (a form of eyeliner) along their eyelashes. Though nail decoration originated in the east, nail polish as we know it today is thought to be a western invention – entrepreneurs began to experiment with the lacquer used for car paint in the 1920s. Cutex and Glazo were likely the first cosmetics companies to sell coloured liquid nail varnish, in a shade of pink, Suzanne E Shapiro writes in her book *Nails: The Story of the Modern Manicure*.

"Tremendously smart. The irresistible flutter of bright, rose-lit finger tips," professed a 1927 Cutex ad, which featured a woman flaunting her nails while smoking. "Can be used without fear of injury to the nails," the company declared. Incidentally, early formulations of nail polish were made with high levels of nitrocellulose, a flammable ingredient initially developed as a military explosive.

Manicures sit at the intersection of class, gender, power, and race; nail polish is far more than makeup – it can be political. In communities of colour, wearing false nails with exaggerated designs can signify a rejection of Eurocentric beauty norms and a celebration of one's ethnic identity. Women of colour are often judged differently for how they present: a white woman with manicured hands may be seen as trendy, while a Black or brown woman may be seen as transgressive. Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latin American justice in the US Supreme Court, was advised by the White House to keep her nail colour neutral for her confirmation; at a reception marking her appointment though, she defiantly wore fire-engine red nails. People took to Twitter to praise her. "Good for her," read one post, "she's staying true to herself in a man's world."

Kylie Jenner helped popularise acrylics among white women, regularly showing off her tips on Instagram (there are currently 213m Instagram posts with the hashtag #nails). Nail decoration, as such, isn't immune to cultural appropriation; though white women are now wearing acrylics in abundance, long, curved false nails have historically been central to Black culture. In an essay for *The Cut*, Tembe Denton-Hurst reflects on how she had for years worried that wearing acrylics might "signal something about me I didn't want to communicate: that I was 'ghetto', 'loud', or didn't fit in." Denton-Hurst's feelings shed light on the range of reverberations stemming out of white supremacy, from systemic racism and discrimination to cultural erasure and socio-economic imbalances.

To Desire Thompson, 33, a Brooklyn-based writer, manicures represented a celebration of her Black ancestry. At 14, she started going to Dominican salons for acrylics. "My best friend wore acrylics. She opened me up to the next level of girlhood and femininity. Getting ridiculously long nails was the equivalent of me coming out as a fly girl." While Thompson avoids acrylics these days, she still occasionally gets gel manicures. "My nails are a good representation of what I feel about myself. It's as if I'm putting heels on my nails when I get them done, like I'm dressing up my fingers."

Manicures can also be an act of defiance. In Iran, women have viewed their appearance as an opportunity for civil disobedience. Following 1979's Islamic Revolution, women rebelled by exposing some hair under their scarves, wearing lipstick, flaunting bright colours and getting manicures. "When the authorities were overbearing in the 1990s and 2000s and hassled women for their appearance, especially going into universities or government offices, they fixated on nail polish and lipstick," says author Azadeh Moaveni. Iranian women continue to push back on restrictions. In the photo of Mahsa Amini that went viral following her death while in police custody in September 2022, the 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman has her lips and nails painted burgundy. In the months following Amini's death, millions took to the streets demanding reform and chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom."

As I came of age in Lebanon, I was expected by my family to be demure; some conservative Muslims frown upon nail polish or excessive makeup. "Is God punishing me for my transgressions?" I pondered after I broke one of my acrylics on a train in late 2021 and felt a pang of pain that was so pronounced I almost fainted. I'd been taught that eliciting male attention by beautifying oneself implied a form of lustful vanity, which would inevitably lead to sinful behaviour. I lay down on three seats and read a dua, or prayer, until I gathered myself. When someone asked me what was wrong, I fumbled and said I'd fallen over, too embarrassed to say I'd succumbed to a broken nail.

To me and my sister, manicures feel like a kind of therapy. While making ourselves up may have started as a small rebellious act, it became a form of self-preservation. Throughout my struggles with anxiety, depression and even body dysmorphia, I've consistently turned to nail art and my trusty kohl. If my nails could speak, they would tell you the opposite of my mood. The more serious the turmoil in Lebanon and the more cataclysmic the news updates, the brighter my manicures. The deeper my guilt for living away from my parents and home country, the more daring my nail patterns. Following difficult breakups you can find me at the nail salon, oversharing details about my situationships with my manicurist as she casually eases my heartbreak with each stroke of colour.

Perhaps these pinks and sparkles are a silly distraction from more serious matters, but they bring me moments of joy. As for the risks, I've dabbled in nail stickers, varnish and dip powder nails, which involve minimal UV light exposure. I also drench my hands in SPF 50 before heading to the salon. These "heels for my nails" might give me intermittent pain, but it's a pain I'm willing to endure. In Arabic, we have a proverb that roughly translates to: "She who wants pretty things should not complain." ■

Eyeliner: A Cultural History by Zahra Hankir will be published by Harvill Secker and Penguin Books in November

If my nails could speak, they would tell you the opposite of my mood

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One step at a time

Walking is the simplest and most natural thing to do, but its impact on our health and wellbeing is dramatic and far-reaching. Writer and passionate walker Annabel Streets reveals why we should all be putting one foot in front of the other

Words **ANNA FIELDING** *Photographs* **KATE PETERS**

Annabel Streets is searching for a conifer. It is a bright, early March day and we are looping around the gardens of Fulham Palace in southwest London. She spots what she is looking for: a large spreading yew tree. We stand looking up at the clusters of leathery, spiked leaves and breathe deeply.

"Every day I stand under an evergreen tree now," she says. "I have become obsessed with terpenes."

Terpenes are a type of organic compound produced by plants, part of a protection system against insects, disease and rot. They are the reason pine trees smell piney and citrus trees smell citrussy. They are also one of the reasons humans are drawn to trees. The presence of these tiny molecules has an anti-inflammatory effect on the body. Laboratory research has shown that the terpene a-pinene, found in conifers such as our yew tree, could have properties that prevent cancer. Studies on the citrus compound D-limonene suggest it is an effective mood-booster and antidepressant.

"Terpenes are the trees' own immune system," says Streets, "and when you walk underneath them you breathe that self-protection mechanism. There are studies showing that the blood pressure of people walking under evergreens was significantly lower than that of the people walking in a control group."

This is just the start of our walk and only the first of Streets's remarkable facts. She has just published a book, *52 Ways to Walk*, which is full of clearly presented science, nuggets of history and infectious enthusiasm for being out in the world and simply walking as a way of tackling so many of our ills. She's the ideal companion for an afternoon's urban ramble.

"While I was writing the book, I found myself thinking of my granny quite often," she says. "All the things she would say – 'Go for a walk and take a few deep breaths and then you'll feel calmer' – that sort of thing. I thought it was just my granny being whimsical. But it turns out that she was right all along."

One of the joys of *52 Ways to Walk* is discovering that there's a scientific basis for much of what we'd call common sense or folk wisdom – and so much of it is rooted in leaving the house and going for a walk: getting the sun on your skin can help your immune system, and there's nothing harmful in getting covered in mud. In fact, it can help your gut health.

As a little girl, Streets fell in love with walking. She remembers being four or five years old and out near her grandparents' house in Sheringham. The big skies and flat lands of the North Norfolk coast were "amazing, beautiful, these great swathes of sand..." and the small Annabel would walk for miles.

But in adulthood, she fell into a pattern familiar to many of us – days spent hunching towards a computer, evenings prone on the sofa. Working out in the gym, but using the car to get there. The combination of desk job and driving made her body "rounder, softer, achier, stiffer, stooped" and her mind anxious and unsettled. She made a resolution to do as much as she could on foot, getting a dog and proper wet-weather gear for extra motivation.

For Streets, it was a spark, a gleeful rekindling of an old love affair. "Walking had never seemed more beguiling ›

'My granny used to say, go for a walk and take a few deep breaths and then you'll feel calmer. Turns out that she was right all along': Annabel Streets

Walking is freedom, an escape for the mind and the body

› or thrilling," she writes in the book's introduction. Her friends, and especially her family, didn't catch the same vibe. It was wet. It was cold. It was boring. It was slow. It was just... walking.

"I wanted to show people all the reasons there were to walk," she says. "Even in the darkness, even in the rain, there will be something that part of us will respond to, whether that's physiological or emotional or cognitive. I didn't want to be the person who was just telling everyone to get their 10,000 steps."

The 52 Ways to Walk project was actually the product of over-enthusiastic research. Streets, who also writes as Annabel Abbs, has written several historical novels, all based on real women, like Lucia Joyce, a professional dancer and the daughter of James Joyce; or Frieda Weekley who eloped with DH Lawrence and is considered to be the inspiration for Lady Chatterley. Streets had been working on a nonfiction book, *Windswept*, where she walked the routes taken by famous women, such as the artist Georgia O'Keeffe or the nature writer Nan Shepherd. "There was memoir and biography and I had also included a lot of scientific research about walking," she says. "My editor, quite rightly, insisted I remove it." Rather than let it go to waste, that research was the start of *52 Ways*. "Other people, who were much more expert than me on various topics, were very generous with their knowledge and their time," she says. "There are shelves and shelves of research on walking, but I think people have largely found it unsexy."

We have turned on to a path that follows the Thames. Reflected sunlight gives a chrome cast to the river. "It's magical," says Streets, looking out at the refracting glitter, "and when the sun shines down on the water like this it means you get twice as much light, so you get twice the serotonin boost and serotonin is what makes us happy." This is a typical blend of the scientific and the romantic found in the book. For Streets, a waterfall doesn't stop being inspiring and wonderful when you know that the presence of negative ions, molecules of air and water charged with electricity, are the reason for your lowered heart rate and reduced stress. Studies on the potential effects of the full moon – covering everything from a higher rate of women going into labour to increases in violent crime – are inconclusive, but Streets feels that adds to "the eerie, enigmatic qualities of a moonlit walk".

Her enthusiasm extends to the extremely practical. She shows me her walking boots which don't taper, as most shoes do, but let your toes splay naturally. They have thin, flexible soles and no heel, mimicking shoeless walking. "There was an interesting study on people who wore barefoot shoes for six months," she says. "The muscles in people's feet improved by 60%. So you are building muscle and, possibly, strengthening the bones."

She also shows me how to walk, which sounds ridiculous but, as Streets points out, "so many of us walk as though we've just come off our laptop. I certainly did." The trick is to hold your chin parallel to the ground, push your shoulder blades down your back and roll your stomach slightly inwards as though tucking it under your rib cage. You then, with each step, roll through your foot heel-to-toe. It's basic postural alignment. But for me, having spent most of the previous two months indoors nursing an injured ankle, it feels like someone has suddenly flicked a switch and completed an electrical circuit.

Walkers of all kinds stride through Streets's book. There are nomads and pilgrims, soldiers and children, protesters and paraders. There is something to learn from everyone, whether that's the military practice of tabbing – covering mile after mile with a backpack – that is good for both heart and mind, or the mindful breathing that allows Afghan livestock herders to walk far and fast with little fatigue.

In the book, she doesn't often mention women as a specific group (although the chapter on getting lost makes the interesting point that the observed differences in spatial skills between men and women have nothing to do with the brain and everything to do with cultural conditioning). But in conversation she is a passionate defender of the right of women to walk alone and at all times of day. "I walked from Toulouse to Bordeaux by myself," she says. "Occasionally, a barge would come down the canal, but there was nothing on the river. There was nothing around me to be scared of." She talks about silver water and spotting herons and picking wild figs to eat. The only time she felt unsafe was, ironically, in an Airbnb, booked to avoid solo camping, where the promised host couple turned out to be a single man who was too keen for company.

"I wonder if sometimes it's about perception," she says, about walking alone. "At home we know all the horror stories and all their locations, but when we're elsewhere we don't have that knowledge. We don't know about the horrible things, so we think we're safe. And nine times out of 10 we are. We look at women in the past who've done big journeys and think they're intrepid or brave, but they also didn't have daily news stories about what could go wrong."

Walking side by side creates another kind of vulnerability, or at least an easy intimacy. Streets cites an anthropological study that suggests a rhythmic pace, co-ordinated movement and a lack of eye contact make it easy for us to open up as we walk along with another person. And, as we cross a bridge and head back up river, I find myself sharing things about my own life, something I would never usually do while interviewing.

Walking with Annabel Streets means getting caught in the current of her enthusiasm. As a talker and as a writer she's full of information, but avoids coming off as a preacher or a know-it-all. She is delighted to be out with the blackthorn blossom and the shouts of practising rowers. Her book has this spirit, it wears its research light and it's suffused with the simple pleasure of putting one foot in front of the other. When Epping Forest comes up in conversation, she zooms in on the map to review this unknown area and rapidly decides she could walk from northeast London to Cambridge in a couple of days, stopping off to see a friend in Saffron Walden. Walking is an activity that can thud with dull-but-virtuous tones, like a solid loaf of too-wholemeal bread, but, for Streets, walking is freedom, an escape for the mind and the body.

"One day last summer, I woke up really early," she says, "around 5am, no going back to sleep. I got the tube to Victoria and then the train out to Tonbridge. By 9am I was in the middle of Kent. I followed the river all the way up to Maidstone. And, of course, the brilliant thing about rivers is that you don't need a map."

Really, the title *52 Ways to Walk* is somewhat misleading. There are hundreds of reasons, grouped roughly into a year's worth of weekly walks. You can get technical with mountains and backpacks, or you could just open the front door and see where the road takes you. ■

52 Ways to Walk, the Surprising Science of Walking for Wellness and Joy, One Week at a Time, by Annabel Streets, is published by Bloomsbury at £10.99 and is available from guardianbookshop.com at £9.67

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Salmon adds a modern twist to this classic coronation dish

Photographs **JONATHAN LOVEKIN**

I am rather hoping to eat outside this weekend. Coronation chicken, to the recipe devised by Rosemary Hume in 1953, might be appropriate, but I would prefer something lighter and more refreshing. I have updated the recipe with a less-rich sauce, swapping some of the mayonnaise for yoghurt and introduced a cool crispness with green grapes and mint. Even changing the chicken for baked salmon, I feel the dish carries something of the spirit of Rosemary's original recipe.

There is always a temptation to end our lunch with some sort of homegrown fruit dessert, but early May is hardly the best time for that. I am making an old-fashioned milky ice, mercifully unsweet, with a gentle citrus note in the background. I'm using buttermilk, which thankfully the major stores are now stocking again (if not, try your nearest whole food shop). The ice-cream will be eaten with buttery shortbread, rolled in pretty, rose-scented sugar.

Salmon with grapes and mango chutney

If perfect tart green grapes prove elusive, use cucumber for its cool crunchy quality. Peel it, remove the seeds and cut it into thick slices. While coriander might be my favourite herb, it is worth bearing in mind that it is not for everyone. If you are making this for a group, it is best to check first or to play safe and use parsley. If you feel an accompaniment is necessary, nothing is more appropriate than some steamed rice, left to cool, then dressed with rice vinegar and lime zest. *Serves 6*

salmon fillet	750g
olive oil	2 tbsp
bay leaves	2
curry powder	2 tsp, mild or hot
ginger	1 x 25g piece
natural yoghurt	150g
mayonnaise	100g
coriander leaves	3 tbsp, chopped
mint leaves	2 tbsp, chopped
mango chutney	3 tbsp
green grapes	250g

Preheat the oven to 200C/gas mark 6. Put the salmon skin side down on a foil-lined baking dish. Pour over the oil, season lightly with salt and the bay leaves, then pull up the edges of the foil and squeeze loosely together to seal. Bake for 20 minutes, then remove from the oven and leave to rest, still in its foil.

To make the sauce put the curry powder in a mixing bowl, peel the ginger and grate it very finely to a paste, then add to the curry powder. Stir in the yoghurt, mayonnaise, coriander and mint, then add a little salt. Stir in the mango chutney.

Check the seasoning. The sauce should be creamy with a warmth from the curry, but fresh from the mint and yoghurt.

Halve the grapes, remove the seeds and add to the sauce. (I genuinely don't think you need to skin the grapes, but by all means do so if you wish.) Break the salmon into large pieces and add the sauce, mixing very gently and taking care not to break the fish up. Spoon on to a serving dish, scattering with a few whole mint and coriander leaves if you wish.

Buttermilk ice-cream

Buttermilk has a slight sharpness that brings a freshness to ice-cream. In the past week or two, I have eaten it with poached apricots and with raspberries and will, no doubt, be making it all summer long. *Serves 10*

crème fraîche	500ml
caster sugar	125g
lemon	1
vanilla extract	2 tsp
buttermilk	500ml

Put the crème fraîche in a medium-sized, nonstick saucepan with the sugar

›

Chilling out: buttermilk ice-cream with rose-sugar shortbread. Facing page: salmon with grapes and mango chutney

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I've also eaten the ice-cream with apricots and will, no doubt, be making it all summer long

› over a moderate heat. Finely grate the lemon zest and add to the crème fraîche, then warm until the sugar is dissolved, stirring regularly. Remove from the heat, stir in the vanilla and set aside. When completely cold, stir in the buttermilk, pour into an ice-cream maker and churn until almost frozen.

Have a plastic freezer box in the deep freeze. When the ice-cream is almost frozen, scrape the mixture into the freezer box. Cover and freeze until firm to the touch.

Take the ice-cream out of the freezer about 15 minutes before you intend to serve it. Place scoops of it into bowls. Serve it with the cubes of sugared shortbread (below).

Rose-sugar shortbread

This makes a soft-textured shortbread. If you like yours a little crisper, bake it for a further 5-7 minutes.
48 small pieces, serves 10-12

butter 300g
caster sugar 190g, plus 50g to decorate
plain flour 300g
semolina 150g
crystallised roses 25g, to decorate

Preheat the oven to 170C/gas mark 3½. Put the butter and sugar in the bowl of a food mixer fitted with a flat paddle and cream until soft. Line the base of a 30cm x 20cm shallow baking tin with baking parchment.

Add the flour and semolina to the butter and sugar and mix briefly. (If you work the dough too much your shortbread will be tough.) Bring the dough together into a ball.

Push the dough into the tin, press it tenderly into the corners with your fingers or a floured spoon, taking care not to compact the mixture. Bake in the preheated oven for about 30 minutes. The surface should be pale gold and slightly firm. Remove from the oven, then score into 48 small squares with a knife.

Crush the rose petals roughly using a pestle and mortar or the end of a rolling pin, then mix with the extra caster sugar. Alternatively, blitz them to a powder in a food processor.

Break or cut the shortbread into pieces and toss gently with the rose sugar. ■

Nigel's midweek dinner

Sweet potato and chorizo

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

Wash 2 medium-sized **sweet potatoes**, then put them into a steamer basket or colander and place over a pan of boiling water, cover with a lid and steam until tender but still slightly firm to the touch, about 12-15 minutes.

Make the dressing: put 3 tbsp of **vegetable oil** in a shallow pan. Peel 2 cloves of **garlic** and slice them very thinly. Warm the oil over a moderate heat, then add the garlic, letting it fry for 3 or 4 minutes and taking care it doesn't get any darker than pale gold. While it colours, finely shred a medium-sized **red chilli** and add to the pan, letting it cook only for a minute or two. Stir in 1 tbsp of **honey**, let it melt, then add the juice of a **lime** and 3 tsp of **soy sauce**. Let it all bubble together for a minute or so, then remove from the heat.

Cut 4 plump **chorizo sausages** into thick slices and set aside. Remove the sweet potatoes from the steamer and peel off the skin. Cut into thick slices and place them on a foil-lined grill pan. Heat an overhead grill, lightly brush the slices of sweet potato with oil, then place under the grill for 4 or 5 minutes. Brush them generously with the dressing and continue cooking for a couple of minutes until sizzling. Remove and place on a serving dish and keep warm.

Grill the chorizo and serve with the chilli sweet potatoes. *Enough for 2*

● The sugary quality of the sweet potato works splendidly with the paprika-spiked chorizo, but you could use a maincrop potato if you prefer. Steam a couple of medium-sized potatoes whole, then cut into thick slices, as above.
● If you fancy a cloud of mash with your chorizo instead, steam the sweet potatoes, as above, but mash them instead of slicing, using the honey-chilli dressing in place of butter, spooning it over the mash as you go. ■

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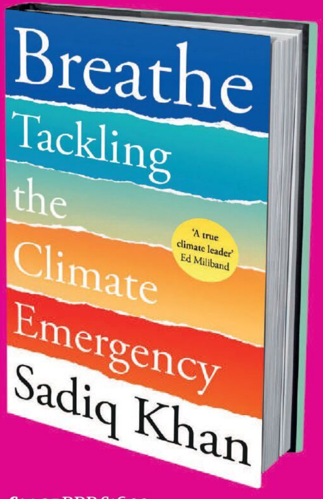

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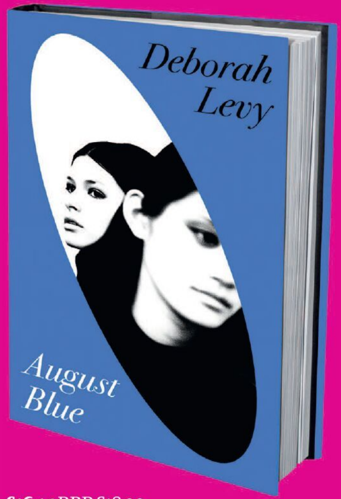

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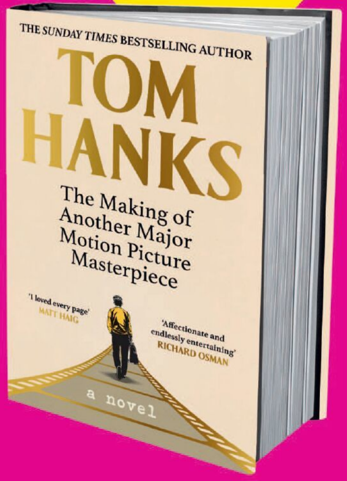

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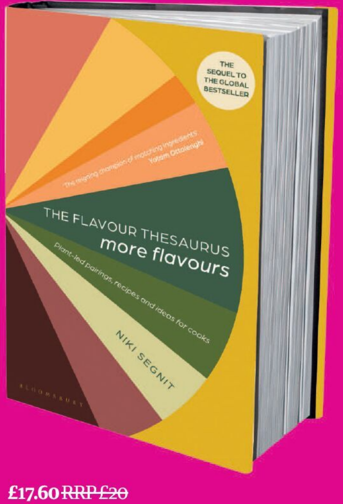

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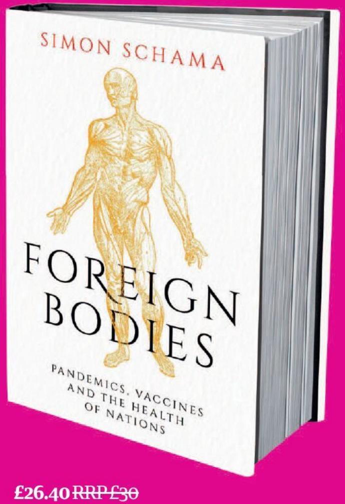

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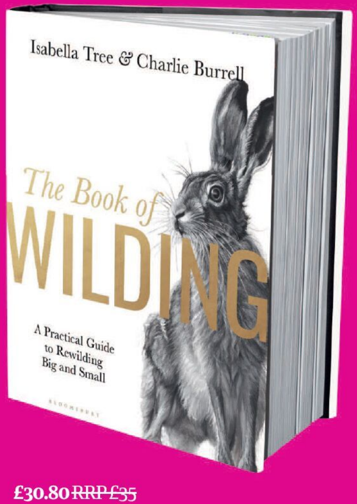

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Food & drink
Jay Rayner

Critic of the year @jayrayner1

Toot, a Persian place in Plymouth, could easily blow its own trumpet, but they've let me do it instead

'Persian food on fire': (from left) kebab royal with rice and salad; and the colourful interior of the restaurant

The kebabs are charred and briskly seasoned, and so fresh off the grill that they still seem to be sizzling in front of us

Toot
46 Mayflower Street,
Plymouth PL1 1QX
(01752 223 736;
tootonline.co.uk)
Starters **£5.95**
Mains **£12.50–£17.50**
Desserts **£5.95**
Wines from **£21.50**

Shortly after the starters had been cleared at Toot in Plymouth, plates of individual butter portions were placed on the table, as if it was breakfast in a seaside B&B. We squinted at their silver foil wrappings. What's that all about? And then it dawned on us. We were in a Persian restaurant and the rice was coming. All hail the Persian way with rice: that light, fluffy miracle of individual grains, made all the more luscious through the liberal application of butter. Plates are placed in front of us, the snowy peaks stained a light saffron-yellow. Our waiter encourages us to apply the butter. She points us at the shakers on the table, which contain the deep purple citrus burst of sumac. "Use that, too," she says briskly, and disappears into the kitchen.

Automatically, we start forking away the rice, as if forgetting that it's really there to keep the rest of our order company. But then, in a restaurant drawing on the traditions of what is now known as Iran, it's hard to see the rice as anything but the main event. Culinary league tables are frowned upon these days. Describing one part of the world's food traditions as intrinsically better than another's is just not the done thing. They are all the product of their unique history and culture. And so on. That said, if there was ever a rice Olympics, which is a sporting tournament I could very much get behind, those cooking it in the Persian way should easily take the gold. God, it's good.

The approach to Toot, which opened in Plymouth a few years ago, is not a happy one right now. It's located just off Armada Way, a long pedestrian shopping precinct, its hard modernist lines softened by the broad, heavily planted woodland down the middle. In March, after being told by the town's citizens how much they liked those trees, the council started chopping them down anyway. They did this in the small hours of the morning, like furtive petty criminals trying to get away with larceny. An injunction was taken out an hour into the work, stopping the chainsaws, but by then the damage had been done. The night I was in Plymouth the huge piles of felled woodland were still lying there, rimmed by high wire fences, now tied with coloured ribbons by locals to mourn their demise.

We navigate our way around the chaos and the hoardings, to the riot of colour that is Toot, its window bearing the legend "Persian food on fire". Inside, there are saffron-coloured walls to match the rice and rough-hewn furniture in candy crush shades as if the mood board for the makeover was a packet of Skittles. The menu is divided between a long list of small dishes at £5.95 each, and kebabs, grills and stews priced in the low to mid-teens. Tonight, as there often is when BBC Radio 4's *Kitchen Cabinet* is on tour, we are many and we are hungry. The boss looks at our nine eager faces and points at a £35-a-head deal: pretty much all the starters, platters of kebabs, tea and baklava to finish. She does some quick mental arithmetic and tells us exactly how much it will cost. She's the kind of woman to whom you want to entrust your evening and we do so, greedily. Inevitably, we will leave tonight with warm foil containers packed with that which we could not finish.

It was not for want of trying. There are many joys among those small plates, which arrive in bowls perched on long slate platters, a utilitarian vehicle, rather than some deeply annoying presentation device. There are pert meatballs in an intense tomato sauce, heavy with cinnamon. There's an olive oil-drizzled hummus topped with thick threads of spiced roast lamb shawarma and the cool barbecued aubergine dip moutabel, soft with tahini and sweet-sour courtesy of pomegranate molasses. There's a dish of hot stewed aubergine,

›

Photographs **KAREN ROBINSON**

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Jay Rayner

Toot toot: (from top) hummus shawarma; fesenjoon; chicken pastilla; chicken wings; and baklava

› making a virtue of the vegetable's light astringency. There are sweet, crisp chicken pastilla, made with filo and more cinnamon, and nutty falafel and stuffed vine leaves. There are an awful lot of things. We tear at soft folds of warm flatbread, and mop and dredge and mop again. To prove I hadn't mislaid all my critical faculties I should say there were also some odd, potato-heavy fish cakes, which seemed to have wandered in from another, rather less ambitious restaurant.

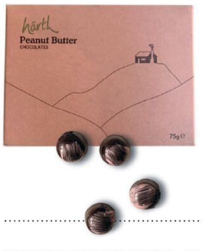
The starters are cleared. The butter arrives. The rice is served. A few minutes later we look up to see vast platters of kebabs hove into view. I endeavour to take a photograph, but really what I need is a drone shot. I make do with a drifting video from one end of the pitch to the other. "It's a meat field," one of my companions says, admiringly. He's not wrong. It is lamb and chicken, delivered three ways. There are chops, long minced lamb kebabs and grilled pieces of lamb; there are chicken wings, minced chicken kebabs and pieces of chicken.

All of it is appropriately charred and briskly seasoned and so fresh off the grill that they seem to be sizzling in front of us. Alongside are a few grilled tomatoes and peppers, so you can claim to be eating a balanced diet. I have also ordered a bowl of their fesenjoon, a famously rich stew of crushed walnuts and pomegranate molasses the colour of night, in this case served with dinky chicken kofte. It is sour and savoury and compelling. The non-meat eater in our group declares himself very well served by the gheymeh bademjan, a stew of aubergine and lentils, spritzed with lime, from the sizeable non-meat menu. I should have tried it, but I was seated in front of a meat field. Not my fault.

At the end, we sip thimble-sized glasses of tea, heady with cardamon, and nibble at tiny squares of baklava for which we do not have space. In creative-writing classes students are told to "show don't tell". If I've passed that test, you should already understand that Toot gave us a very good time indeed and at a very good price. We are the last to leave. The owner stands by the door and asks us sweetly to leave positive reviews on some festering digital hell-hole site, the name of which I missed. I thank her profusely, comforted rather grandly by the knowledge that I should really be able to do a little better than that. ■

Notes on chocolate

Bath is a city of glorious vistas – and chocolate shops, discovers *Annalisa Barbieri*



I am in Bath. It's been decades since I last visited and I was too young and stupid, then, to really appreciate how beautiful this city is. Every building looks as if it's been brushed with tea to age it à la school project (yes I realise the buildings are already old) and it's surprisingly hilly – some so steep they took my socks off.

If you go, and you should, visit Topping: not chocolate, but an amazing bookshop, they serve you free tea in china cups and post your books if you don't live locally (for £2.95, bargain). Also, while not on the subject of chocolate: very good cinnamon twists from the Bertinet bakery.

Chocolate! I bought some lovely **Hárth** Peanut Butter bonbons, £8/75g, from the delightful Hidden Store, and also some really expensive handpainted glasses, but shhh. Hárth also does some hot chocolate that contains corn powder, which apparently mixes up to a thick Spanish-style drink, but my bag was already getting heavy.

I visited one posh chocolate shop not once but twice in the hope of any sort of service, but none was forthcoming. If you're selling truffles for £25 a box you should at least engage with your customers and maybe let them try some things.

Quite the opposite at the **Bath Chocolate Company** where the young man behind the counter couldn't have been more friendly and helpful and I bought two delicious soft centres (hazelnut and coffee) for £1.20 each. Sadly no mail order, so you'll have to visit.

Gloriously, the **Cortado** café on Bridge Street sells Sur alfajores, £4.20, as well as lovely food and great coffee.

Wines of the week

Sauvignon blanc has made itself at home the world over, finds *David Williams*

@Daveydaibach

GREYWACKE
SAUVIGNON BLANC
2022

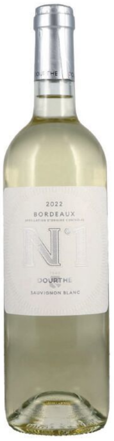
Greywacke Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough
New Zealand 2022
£18.95, Whisky Exchange; Slurp

More than two decades later, I can still remember my first startling sip of Cloudy Bay sauvignon blanc: a vivid snapshot of a sun-dappled realm, where the air is alive with the scent of gooseberries, wild grasses and blackcurrant leaves. That kind of astonishment is rare in wine, and the sheer profusion of wines made from the same grape variety in the same place and in the same style as Cloudy Bay since I first came across the original makes a repeat experience unlikely. As it happens, one of the people responsible for Cloudy Bay, winemaker Kevin Judd, is still among Marlborough sauvignon's most skilled exponents, working now at the Greywacke estate he started in 2009. I came across the current, 2022 vintage recently and it is a beauty.

Kalfu
SUMPAI
SAUVIGNON BLANC
CHILE

Kalfu Sumpai Sauvignon Blanc, Huasco Valley
Chile 2020
£17.85, Frontier Fine Wines; Fintry Wines

New Zealand's biggest rival when it comes to its brand of vibrant sauvignon blanc is another Southern Hemisphere country famed for the piercing clarity of its sunlight: Chile. This was once the place you went for cut-price alternatives to the Marlborough model, and it's true that Chile is still hard to beat for sauvignon that offers more than the shrill acidity and asparagus that too many budget bottlings present: the Co-op's Irresistible Leyda Valley Sauvignon Blanc (£8.50) is a delicious example of what's on offer from the coastal vineyards of Leyda. Increasingly refined examples are popping up all over the country, with Kalfu Sumpai, from a vineyard high up in the Atacama Desert, offering a wonderfully zippy, salty-minerally, dryly refreshing style.



Dourthe No1 Sauvignon Blanc
France 2022
£9.25, The Wine Society

The true home of sauvignon blanc is in western France, with producers in both the Loire and Bordeaux making the case for their region as the grape variety's birthplace. Examples from the Loire are easier to find in the UK, with recent favourites of mine ranging from £8.99 (the bustling gooseberry of Waitrose Blueprint Touraine Sauvignon Blanc 2021) to £24 (the cool-stream-over-stone rush of Gerard et Pierre Morin Sancerre 2021 at robersonwine.com). In Bordeaux, dry white winemaking has tended to be overshadowed by the region's great reds, and the habit has in any case been to blend sauvignon with semillon. Increasingly, however, winemakers have bowed to global demand for 100% sauvignons, and Dourthe's tangy example is one of the most refreshing around.

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The edit

Wedding outfits

The invite has arrived, but what will you wear? Whether you choose to rent or buy clever separates, here are five nuptial solutions

Harriet Green
Editor, Observer Magazine

'When in doubt, a floral print always works.' **Blazer** £159, mintvelvet.co.uk **Dress** £189, adriannapapell.com **Earrings** £39, whistles.com **Clutch** £89, lkbennett.com **Wedges** £235, ivyleecopenhagen.com

Roz Donoghue
Fashion assistant

'Rent a statement piece for a special occasion.' **Suit** £80, 3-day rental, Aggi (byrotation.com) **Sunglasses** £110, aceandtate.com **Bag** £65, itsrooper.co.uk **Ring** £150, monicavinader.com **Heels** £59, charleskeith.co.uk

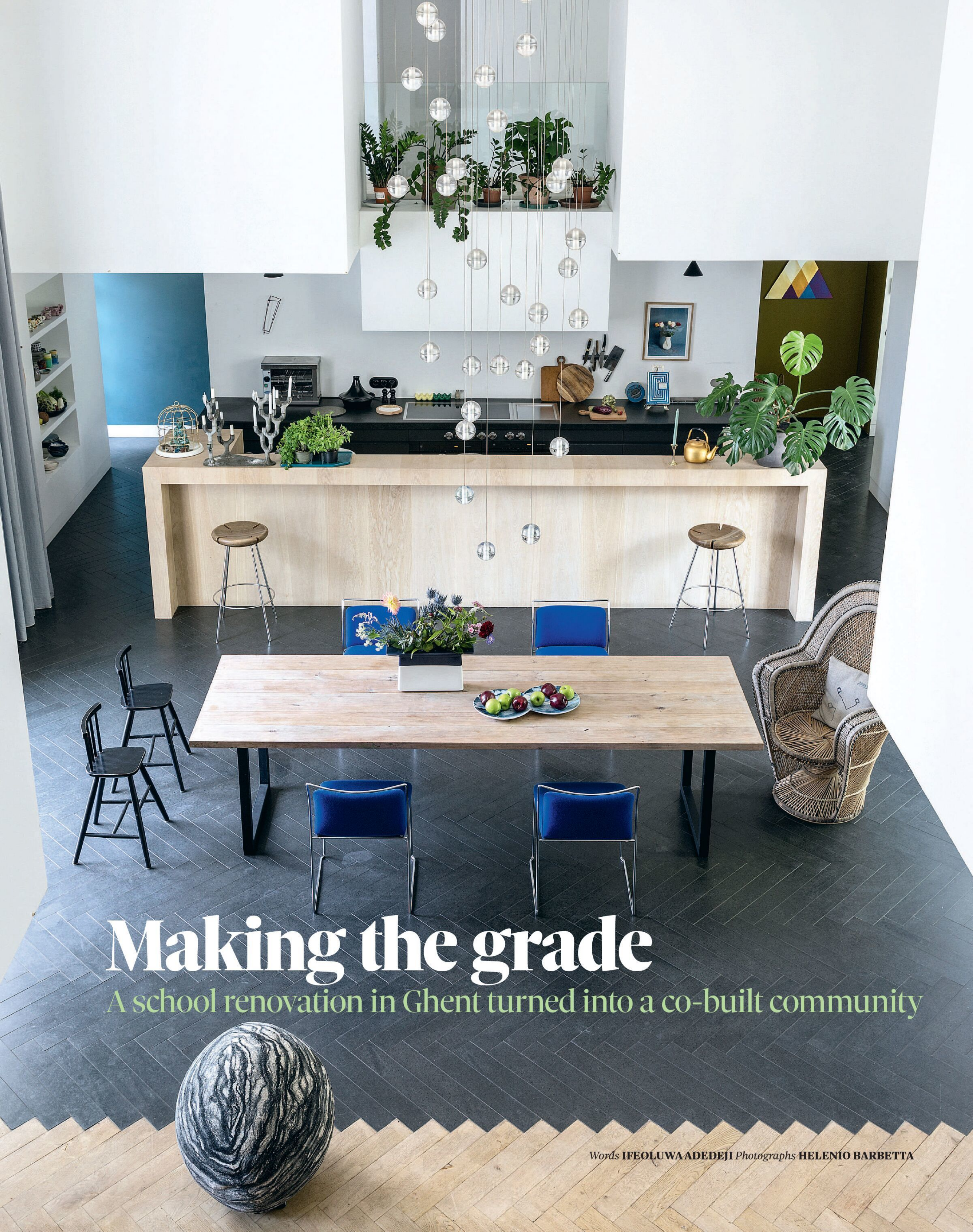
Jo Jones *Fashion editor*
'Layer up a plain silk dress with a printed kimono.' **Kimono** £119, plumo.com **Dress** £329, Maje (selfridges.com) **Bag** £99, whistles.com **Cuff** £38, anthropolgie.com **Necklace** £45, cosstores.com **Shoes** £295, aedye.com

Helen Seamons
Men's fashion editor

'Go for separates you can rewear.' **Blazer** £59.99, zara.com **Camisole** £39, johnlewis.com **Skirt** £95, ghost.co.uk **Clutch** £69, 3-day rental, Cult Gaia (byrotation.com) **Ring** £70, jigsaw-online.com **Sandals** £89.99, mango.com

Bemi Shaw
Contributing stylist

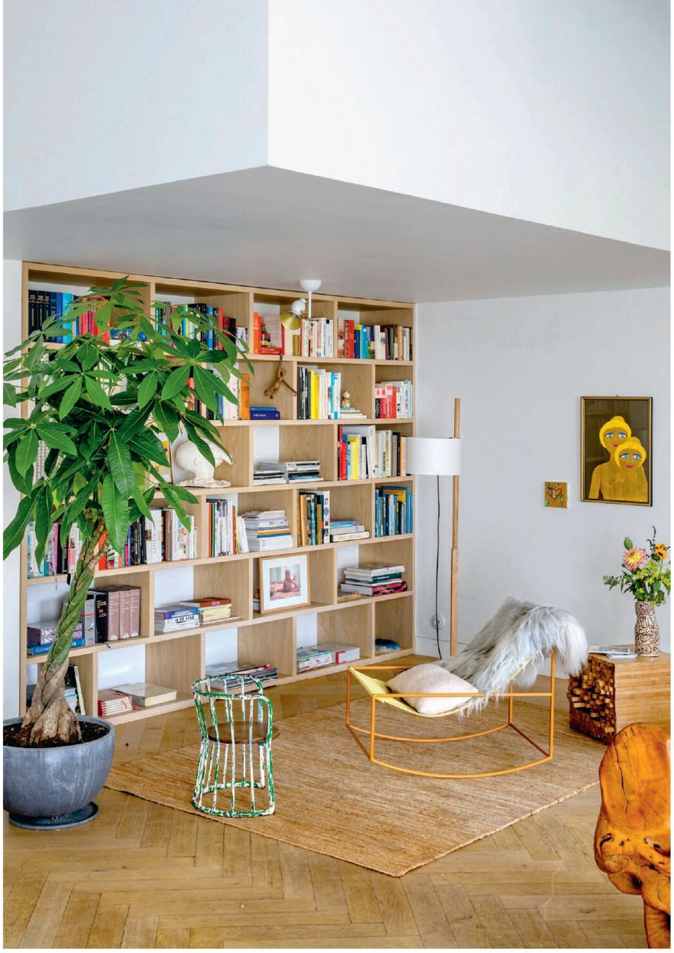
'Mix high street and rental accessories for an affordable look.' **Top** £240, self-portrait.com **Trousers** £118, reiss.com **Sandals** £47.50, next.co.uk **Earrings** £49, ottomanhands.com **Bag** £99, 1-month rental, Bottega Veneta (cocoon.club)



Making the grade

A school renovation in Ghent turned into a co-built community

Words **IFEOLUWA ADEDEJI** *Photographs* **HELENIO BARBETTA**

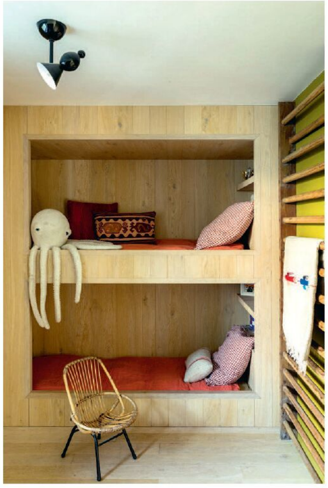


On her first visit, 15 years ago, to the abandoned school complex that was to become her family home, Veva van Sloun was in for a surprise. Located in a busy area of Ghent, the old school was shielded from the main street by bamboo planting. Beyond white gate she discovered it had a hidden courtyard garden, not to mention its own chapel. The site was much bigger than she anticipated. "It was so dilapidated that when I leant against the wall some of the bricks crumbled and fell off," she recalls.

Undeterred, she decided to take on the renovation. The chapel had been extended to house the school kitchen and gymnasium. These elements were removed to restore the chapel as a separate entity, giving van Sloun, her husband, Jan, and their children more space. "We had to take off the roof and rebuild it brick by brick because it was in a horrible condition," she says. "I didn't know enough about what I was getting into when I bought it – especially the costs of modernisation."

Fortunately, several other like-minded people became interested in the project, and signed up to be involved. While co-building has made the process longer, it's also made it more affordable.

Midway through the restoration, van Sloun found out she was pregnant with twins. The property didn't lack the space they'd now require for a family of six, but the project itself was also becoming much bigger. Now, 15 years and several iterations of the floorplan later – with the addition of a café, studios and offices – nine other families have settled into the adjacent buildings.



Today, van Sloun's home is perfectly suited to family life. In the kitchen the large custom-made table by Depot Rotterdam ensures there's plenty of room for guests, and the Tulu chairs by Kazuhide Takahama add an electric blue jolt of colour to the neutral scheme. Distinctive 19th-century ecclesiastical elements, such as the pointed arch windows and high ceilings, are complemented by Bocci pendant lamps.

Valuable input from van Sloun's cousin, interior designer Maurice Mentjens, helped model the sizeable proportions to give the chapel a residential finish. "Maurice usually works on hotels, museums and cafés," says van Sloun. He designed the ground floor, integrating materials from Josephine Akvama Hoffmeyer's File Under Pop store." The Danish company sells Sicilian lava stone tiles that have been incorporated into the kitchen and bathroom floors and walls. Mentjens also created the island, which seems almost like an altar, timeless in its form.

The TV room is separated from the living area by a large native-oak sliding panel, which works as a functional backdrop in the living area. The oriental design was inspired by traditional Korean tea rooms and allows both spaces to feel connected, yet private. The Bambole sofa by Mario Bellini is roomy enough for three, while playful soft furnishings, such as the multi-coloured Phillip David Stearns rug, make the space feel relaxed. The Astep suspension lamp design by Gino Sarfatti is understated and elegant. "Lighting is my thing, I consult on lighting design and sell these pieces on my website," says van Sloun.

Overlooking the living room are four white pods, housing the bedrooms. The family lived above the café while work was carried out on the chapel, and being close by they were able to be hands-on with the decision-making. The last room to be completed was the main bedroom; it features oak panelling that runs the full height of the wall, encompassing the door in the same material which creates continuity, interrupted by the niches.

The couple were keen to revive what they could while bringing the building into the 21st century. They insulated the walls and installed a ground source heat pump that serves the underfloor heating; 13 geothermal boreholes 120m deep were drilled so that each of the 10 family homes/residential units would have access to this sustainable feature making them all fully electric. "It has taken a lot of work to get it up to modern standards," van Sloun says of what turned out to be an organic process. "We worked on each area bit by bit, depending on what was happening in our lives at the time. We'll probably never finish." ■

clouds9000.com

Back to school: (clockwise from left) the kitchen with its high ceiling hung with Bocci pendant lamps; the living space, showing one of the four pods above it which house the bedrooms; Veva van Sloun, Jan and the children; a cosy nook; tall church windows

STYLING: CHIARA DAL CANTO; LIVING INSIDE

Call of the wild

Explore 10 of the UK’s most untamed places

Words **SIAN ANNA LEWIS** *Photographs* **ANNAPURNA MELLOR**

1 The Lazy Duck, Aviemore

Calling all lazy ducks! Take it easy at this slow-living sanctuary among the soaring Scots pines of the Cairngorms National Park. A company of eco-friendly cabins, a safari tent and a tiny campsite allow adventurers to hole up across these six wild acres in any way they wish, but the hidden gem here is the Woodsman, a wooden cabin for two with mammoth views of the mountains from the porch. There's a wood-fired hot tub and a sauna available for guests to book, or practise your downward dog with daily yoga sessions. *Cabins from £134 per night, minimum 3 nights, lazyduck.co.uk*

2 Skoolie Stays, Sussex

All-American Skoolie, the school bus, hails from Florida and travelled across the Atlantic to reach a coastal meadow in Sussex, where it now makes for a very special place to stay right by the chalk cliffs of Beachy Head. Inside, the converted bus is surprisingly chic and spacious. The main living area is lined with warm teak. Your big yellow home-from-home is parked just a mile from Beachy Head's chalk cliffs and red-striped lighthouse, and the coast path lets you stretch your legs towards the legendary Seven Sisters cliffs. *From £148 per night, minimum 2 nights, sleeps up to 4, skooliestays.co.uk*

3 Troytown Farm Campsite, Isles of Scilly

If you fancy waking up, unzipping your tent and jumping straight into the ocean, set up camp at Troytown Farm Campsite. Life goes at a slow pace on the car-free island of St Agnes, one of the Isles of Scilly found 28 miles off the Cornish coast. Troytown is in some ways a simple camping spot; the jaw-dropping bit is the location. Two meadows run gently down to meet the Atlantic, with tent-door views of sparkling sea and rocky islets crowned with lighthouses. Swing in a hammock strung up from the rocks, kayak along the island's edge or visit the farm's dairy – the clotted cream ice-cream is legendary. *£12 per person per night, troytown.co.uk*

4 Trees, Cumbria

Trees is well-named – it's a 1930s log house perched on the slope of a Cumbrian fell with forest flanking every side. This is the closest you'll get to feeling like you're tucked up in a treehouse without having to leave the ground, although Lakes would also have been a good name, as the cottage has sweeping views of Lake Windermere. This is Beatrix Potter country – her former farmhouse, Hill Top, now a National Trust site, is close by, and Esthwaite Water, which inspired the froggy character of Jeremy Fisher, is an easy walk. *From £216 per night, minimum 3 nights, sleeps up to 4, nationaltrust.org.uk*

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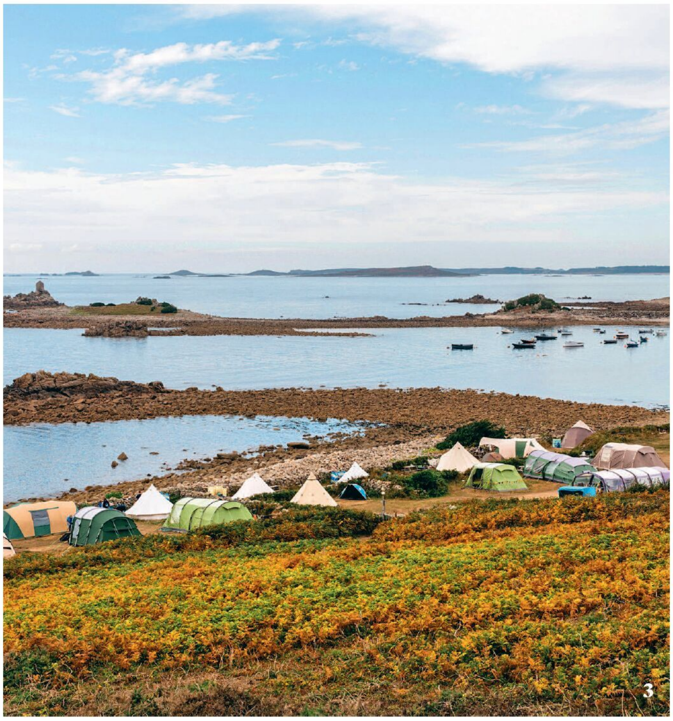
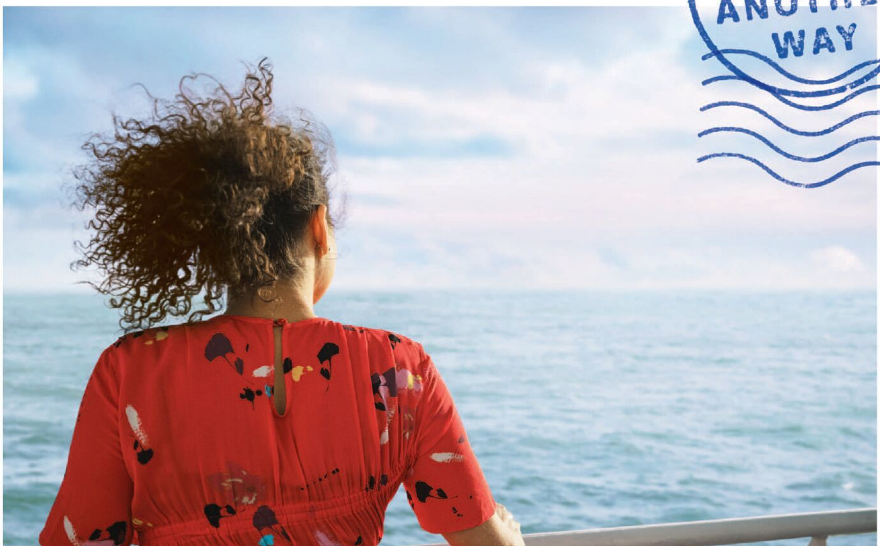
MANATEE DISTRICT SCHOOLS
2



STALE

One of the nicer ways to describe the air on planes and trains.

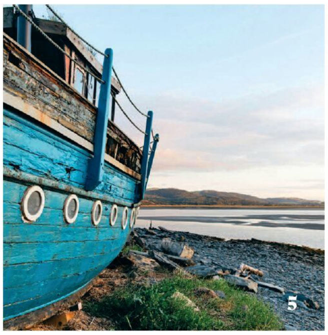


THERE IS ANOTHER WAY

P&O FERRIES

5 *The Boy John, Gwynedd*

Set sail for a night or two aboard the Boy John. It may not leave dry land, but this beached boat on the shores of the Dyfi Valley estuary in mid-Wales makes a magical stay for lovers of the sea. This rustic wreck-turned-glamping boat is not a posh berth, but it's a comfy and quirky one. Bring your binoculars, as the boat is a fabulous place in which to keep an eye on wildlife and a large corner window has sweeping views of the estuary, across to Ynys-hir RSPB nature reserve and the towering peaks of Eryri/Snowdonia National Park. *From £60 per night, minimum 2 nights, sleeps up to 4, smugglerscove.info*



6 *Bird How, Cumbria*

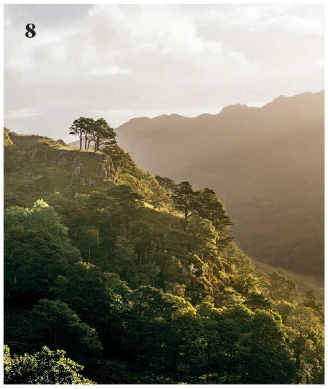
It takes a lot to get off the beaten track these days, but there's a corner of the Lake District where you can properly leave the madding crowds behind. Bird How is in the Eskdale Valley, a wild corner of the Lake District with undulating mountain roads that can be cut off completely in winter conditions. When you eventually arrive at this former cow barn you'll find no phone, no wifi, no TV signal; no mod cons at all. Inside is simple – more bothy than posh cottage – but you're surrounded by wild spaces and rising behind the cottage are the foothills of Scafell Pike. *From £147 per night, minimum 3 nights, sleeps up to 4, nationaltrust.org.uk*

7 *The Raft at Chigborough, Essex*

Row, row, row your boat… to reach this extraordinary wooden cabin, floating adrift on its own lake close to the Essex coast. A fantasy of the American Wild West crash-landed in a peaceful Essex backwater, the Raft at Chigborough is a wide wooden platform with a two-storey cabin perched on top, tethered to the bottom of a reed-lined lake. To reach it, you can stash your bags on board a small boat and row yourself across, or use the floating ferry platform to traverse the water. The sun sets slowly at the Raft – and the best place to watch it sink into the lake is from the luxury of your very own wood-fired hot tub. *From £215 per night, minimum 4 nights, sleeps 2-4, canopyandstars.co.uk*

8 *Hafod y Llan campsite, Eryri/Snowdonia*

Here's how one happy camper described Hafod y Llan, a simple campsite spread out in Wales's Nant Gwynant valley, in the shadow of Yr Wyddfa/Mount Snowdon. "Babbling stream, large shady oaks, sheep in an adjacent fold and, of course, mountains and lakes. Want starry skies? This is a superb place to bring your binoculars." It's hard to think of a more appealing description of a place to pitch your tent than that. Most hikers camp here to test themselves on the biggie, Yr Wyddfa/Mount Snowdon. The steeply ascending Watkin path leads from the campsite to the summit over three hefty miles. *From £20 per night, nationaltrust.org.uk*



9 *Lyveden Cottage, Northamptonshire*

Lyveden is the definition of a romantic ruin, an Elizabethan pile that includes a manor house, a moated garden, a picturesque folly and a recently unearthed apple orchard. It's a fairytale place to explore – and even better, if you stay at Lyveden Cottage, a former forester's house on the estate's meadows, you'll get all of its wildness to yourself once the other visitors have gone home. The cottage sits in lush gardens above the manor house and has its own romantic ruin in the back garden – unfinished Lyveden New Bield stands open to the elements just as the stonemasons left it back in 1605. *From £151 per night, minimum 3 nights, sleeps up to 5, nationaltrust.org.uk*

10 *Brownsea Island, Dorset*

Ready your flags and three-fingered salute – the island that inspired Robert Baden-Powell to start the Scouts movement back in 1907 still has an adventurous spirit today. Brownsea Island sits in the calm waters of Poole Harbour, but this little slice of land has a wild spirit, a flourishing wildlife population and a wonderful campsite to explore from. The most famous resident here is the red squirrel – a population of 200 thrive on Brownsea. Join them by pitching your tent in a shady woodland glade or book one of the campsite's suspended tree tents. *From £28 per night per tent, minimum 2 nights, nationaltrust.org.uk* ■

Wild Escapes: Incredible Places to Unwind and Explore by Siân Anna Lewis is published by National Trust at £14.99 on 11 May. Order a copy for £13.19 at guardianbookshop.com

NATIONAL TRUST

Self & wellbeing

Photograph **RORY MULVEY**

A holiday is about more than just a break. It's a chance to dip a toe into a new version of yourself

Words **BEV THOMAS**

'Travelling can allow us to realise our strengths': writer Bev Thomas and, below left, her father on holiday in Greece

On family holidays, my father transformed himself. Perhaps it was the sunny climate, the change of scene or simply the long-awaited break from work, but almost as soon as the plane landed on the runway, his ordinarily reserved personality was discarded like a winter coat. He became sociable and gregarious. There was a lightness about him as he chatted to strangers on the beach, inviting them to join us for dinner, where he'd entertain them with an endless repertoire of stories and jokes. Two weeks later, clutching a bottle of ouzo as we landed in Heathrow, perhaps he hoped this version of himself might travel home with him. But as he got back to normal life and a busy hospital job, the unopened ouzo was soon pushed to the back of the cupboard to gather dust.

When I left my job as a psychologist and went on a round-the-world trip in search of adventures after a difficult time in my life, maybe I, too, was hoping to become a new person – or, like my father, a different version of myself. I was soon disappointed. It was nerve-wracking to land in a strange place and know nobody. Away from the routines of life, the identity of my job and the security of my network of friends and family, I felt lonely and untethered. And, to my horror, despite visiting eye-wateringly beautiful places, I still felt miserable. Somehow, in the flurry of packing for the trip, I'd forgotten that the thing you don't choose to bring, but can't leave behind, is yourself. I felt a very long way from home. I missed my friends. What was I thinking?

But as the weeks went on, something started to shift. It was during a stay on Ko Phi Phi island in Thailand, when a woman I'd met earlier on the beach approached me and asked if I was free that evening. She'd invited a few other women to meet for dinner. Would I like to join them? We were six women of different ages. At the meal she told us it was her 40th birthday and, as she was travelling alone, she'd decided to celebrate by gathering together a group of women she'd enjoyed meeting during the week. As the waves lapped on the beach, we sat together under a canopy of fairylights eating pad Thai and drinking Tiger beer, and for the next four hours we shared stories about our lives: hopes, dreams, sadness, loss and disappointment. I felt profoundly moved by the honesty of these strangers, and was surprised, too, by the ease with which I felt able to share things about myself.

At the end of the evening, we parted company. The birthday woman was leaving early in the morning. I was also leaving the next day. None of us saw each other again. I don't remember their names, but I do remember the magic of that connection. For all of us, the anonymity was liberating; we had no shared past or future and, as a consequence, we could talk freely without judgment or repercussions.

In the months before I left home, I'd felt saddled by heartbreak and stuckness, and this experience had come to define me – and, in turn, my relationship with friends, family and colleagues. My home narrative read like a well-thumbed book. While the longevity of relationships can be a huge source of comfort, it can also be constraining when you want to write yourself a new and different story.

As I continued my travels, and took jobs along the way, I found these new and transient relationships liberating, and I was surprised by my growing resilience and independence as well as the rediscovery of parts of myself that were long buried. I extended my trip by another six months and when I got a job on a boat, I not only discovered the joy of scuba diving, but also managed to fall back in love with my life again.

Later on, in New Zealand, I met a woman in her 60s who was backpacking solo around the South Island. Over breakfast, I commented on her bravery to travel on her own at her age. "It must be difficult sometimes," I said. "Difficult?" She shook her head fiercely. "Difficult was being a vicar's wife in Leamington Spa for the past 27 years." There was clearly a story there, but she was off, swinging her purple backpack over her shoulder as she disappeared along the Abel Tasman trail.

For many, a holiday is a chance to rest and unwind. But for others, the choice to venture to new and different places is a desire for something else. So how do holidays change us? The clue is perhaps what we're leaving behind. Freud said the key to happiness in life was love (relationships of any kind) and work (a sense of purpose). Contentment is borne out of stability and certainty, but the flip side can mean these tent-pegs of security can become rigid and can stifle adventure and spontaneity. Time away, in a new place, doing new things can be liberating.

Similarly, we all hold multiple roles in life: partner, parent, sibling, friend, colleague, boss, etc, and while these relationships can be a source of joy and comfort, they can come with complex responsibilities and expectations. When working as a therapist, it was often

COURTESY OF BEV THOMAS

the long-term entrenched relationships that were the most complicated. "I'm an independent 49-year old-woman," a recently divorced client said, after her return from a yoga retreat. "So why do I feel like a 12-year-old when I go back to my childhood home?" This split between the old and new self is not uncommon, as key roles in childhood, past relationships or with old friends can be particularly hard to shift. They are layered in years of history – and others may be unconsciously invested in us staying the same. My client needed new and fresh friendships that weren't tainted by the past.

So, a holiday can be a break from normality, a chance to be away from the familiar and to experience new places and meet new people. Free from responsibilities and routine, we can connect with the more playful parts of ourselves. The time-limited and transient nature of a holiday means our usual social norms and inhibitions are cast aside. The desire to share and connect can be intense and effortless. And in the strangeness of a new country, there is the unexpected and the unpredictable, and with this comes the opportunity for spontaneity, adventure and risk – and the chance to dip our toes into a different version of ourselves.

I never saw them again, but I still remember the magic of that night

On the final part of my trip I went on a two-week bus journey from San Francisco to New York, during which I told my fellow passengers about wanting to write fiction on my return to England. Not knowing me at all, they were unanimously encouraging and supportive, and when I returned home with no job, money or flat, it was helpful to remember their unbridled enthusiasm. Being away can sometimes allow us to realise our strengths, aspirations and dreams. It's here that the voice of the super-ego is silenced. We can experience the joy of playing a game of no judgment or consequences. The critical voice is usually our own, but sometimes it's those of others who, because of legitimate worries or concerns, might be less eager to champion a risky decision.

The recent success of *The White Lotus* saw viewers captivated by the twists and turns of the relationship dynamics played out against the gorgeous sunny backdrops of Hawaii and Sicily. And in the same way the holiday, as a suspension of normal life, has long been seen as rich territory for fiction. My own novel, *The Family Retreat*, spans an intense two-week period by the sea on the south coast of England. Lulled by the holiday mood, and the belief they'll never meet again, two women build an intense friendship and share a dangerous secret which will have life-shattering consequences for them both.

For many, the memory of the sundrenched holiday quickly fades in the grey rain of returning home. But it's too easy to blame the weather. I think back to my father and the stark contrast between his holiday self and his work self, and how it was less about becoming someone else, but more about allowing a playful part of himself to surface. I'm sure he'd have liked to experience this lightness on the other 50 weeks of the year and perhaps it's a reminder to us all, as we unpack our suitcases, to find ways to fan the small flames of adventure into our everyday lives. ■

The Family Retreat by Bev Thomas is published by Faber & Faber at £14.99. Buy it for £13.04 at guardianbookshop.com

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Séamas O'Reilly

Despite a limited vocabulary, my baby daughter has already learned the most important word

@shockproofbeats

My daughter, being one year old, mostly keeps her thoughts to herself. I won the battle of the primordial syllables so, for the past two months, the only word she's said is 'dada', a small consolation for the fact that, like her older brother, she vastly prefers her mother's company to my own.

Her refusal to say 'Mama' appears to be an accident of speech and her obsessive repetitions of 'dada' are about as meaningful as they would be if she said the name of our local Amazon delivery man 4,000 times a day, but I'll take the victories where they come.

I don't yet know which of these uses of 'dada' are automatic responses and which might be placeholders for actual speech; tiny little attempts to articulate those thoughts and feelings she can't yet verbalise. Still less whether she is simply referring to the early 20th-century art movement begun by the Zurich avant-garde. All could be true at different points of each day, and much of my time with her is spent trying to decipher each utterance and sort it into its category.

It is, inarguably, the part of her development I find the most fascinating. She's started standing, for seconds of a time, and I cheer each time she does. Ditto her increasing dexterity with objects, at least on those occasions on which she is not smashing them over my head. But none of those small milestones fill me with as much wonder as speech development.

There's a TED Talk called 'The birth of a word', by MIT computer scientist Deb Roy. I watched it long before I had kids. Long enough ago that people were still watching TED Talks, I guess. In it, he illustrates his son's fairly standard experience of language acquisition, which resulted in him learning 503 words by the age of two.

What is remarkable, however, is that Roy deployed a suite of cameras and microphones inside his home for the entire period, picking up every utterance his son made, allowing him to showcase their gradual evolution. This culminated in a 30-second clip of his son at bath time, in which we hear the babble-word 'gaga' slowly mutating, over months, to 'waga', then 'wada' and finally into 'water'.

It's a stunning sequence of audio, compacting the experience of every single human on the planet into a single, wondrous slope of increasing awareness, rendering the mundane act of speech miraculous. Moreover, it suggests that even those smallest, most garbled syllables our children offer, could be conveying meaning much earlier than we realise.

So, I watch my daughter speak with this in mind, as 'dada' morphs into the occasional 'baba' and 'gugug' makes its first few appearances. It's only a matter of time before she addresses my wife by name, and I lose the one advantage I have left. I resolve to say nothing, in the hopes I can stall this whole thing. Until she says mama by herself, mum's the word.

Ask Philippa

My partner reacts badly when I don't accept his help

@Philippa_Perry

The dilemma I recently started my second career. It's in an industry light years from my previous one. As the months pass, I'm gaining a tenuous grip on things, but there have been some difficult days and there will be more.

My partner of two years is already an expert in the same field. Recently, he became angry about me expressing my frustration with challenges of my new job, because I haven't asked him for help. In response to his shouting, I felt flooded and frozen and couldn't really speak. It ended with him in tears because he apparently doesn't know what value he has to me if not this.

He's an intelligent, clever man and early in our relationship when he tried to teach me a new language, I ended up feeling overwhelmed – how he explains things is not how I can learn. He covers subjects he wants to share as opposed to those I need to learn.

I make a conscious effort to express gratitude for his love – he's kind and affectionate – so it surprised me that this is what he needs to feel loved. He's closed off to my experience of his teaching, so telling him "no" leads to an argument as he thinks I should feel differently. The result is I don't feel I can vent if I've had a challenging day.

I've always tried to "choose my battles", but there seem to be so many. I think he'd be happy if I just accepted that he knows better about everything. I don't enjoy feeling like a doormat, but I'm so tired of defending my choices. Should I just accept his offer of help, even if I don't want to, just to make him feel better for the sake of our relationship?

Philippa's answer He doesn't know better about everything. He especially doesn't know better about what you want and need. And, no, you shouldn't accept his offer of help, and the only explanation you need to give is that you don't want to. He also needs to learn that it isn't useful to tell someone what they should be feeling. We feel what we feel.

I wonder if, deep down, he feels insecure. Insecure people tend to act out their anxieties in two main ways: 1) by being needy and/or clingy and 2) being over-controlling. You seem to be getting a dose of both from him. Accepting your love, on the terms you want to give it, would, over time, make him feel more secure. Insecure people may have difficulty realising that they are good enough exactly as they are and so, sometimes, they compensate by trying to sound very clever and pitch things too high. They do this in order to sound superior and to make up for underlying feelings of inadequacy. He's defining his whole self by his profession – I get that from his "if I'm not good for this I'm good for nothing" vibe. Your job is to convince him that he is not his job, but he is a person and one who is kind and affectionate. Explain to him that you are with him because he is that person, not because of his expertise.

He needs to allow you to moan without trying to fix the problem

What you want from him is to be allowed to moan without being fixed; what he seems to want from you is that you should feel about everything the way he would feel if he was you. I think the latter is too much of an ask.

What people sometimes find hard to grasp is that we can all feel differently about the same situation and that other people are not necessarily going to react like we would. This is one of the main causes of misunderstanding in relationships. If we are not careful, instead of clarifying what the other person feels or wants, we erroneously assume our responses to a situation will be the same.

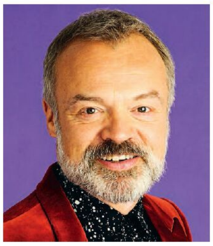
We each put different meanings on to actions or words, and it is important that we check in with each other to clarify whether we are taking the same meaning from what's being said or done. No use me telling you this, but he needs to get that very clever brain of his around this concept or your relationship sounds doomed.

I don't like that you wanted to vent about work yet, despite you being the one needing comfort, he turned it around so that he was the one venting, then crying. He sort of hijacked your turn to moan there.

Unfortunately, when insecure people act out on their feelings of insecurity by demanding other people do what they'd want instead of letting them be themselves – or when they continually ask for proof of their worth from their partner, but only on their terms – their fear of being alone can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I don't want you to get bullied into accepting his "help". The help you want is him listening, not fixing you. I hope you get that message through to him. Don't be coerced into a situation you don't want. Now he's calmer, perhaps have a go at communicating. If he is too closed off to listen, I think that is a red flag you might want to heed. ■

Write to us: *If you feel stuck with a problem, send an email to askphilippa@observer.co.uk. To have your say on this week's column, go to observer.co.uk/ask-philippa*



Sunday with…

Bloody Marys and Wordle for Graham Norton

When does Sunday start? Quite early. I have to present my Virgin Radio show. I'm on air at 9.30am, so I'm out the door and on my bike by 8.45am. Sunday is my turn to get coffee for the team. While I'm there, I treat myself to a muffin. If I'm feeling fragile, I'll nip next door for vegan sausage rolls instead.

After work? I finish at 12.30, so I can still meet up with friends for lunch. Sometimes my husband, Jono, will join me at a dog-friendly Borough Market restaurant. In summer we might have people over.

Is it a religious day? As a child it was. We always went to church. I've never known boredom like it. Time in church seems to pass differently, by which I mean slowly. One of adulthood's greatest joys is never having to go again.

Do you drink? I don't associate any other day of the week with a specific drink, but Bloody Marys are forever linked with Sundays. The spicier the better.

What are you listening to? I just watched a brilliant documentary about Roberta Flack and have become obsessed by her voice.

A special Sunday? I feel honour-bound to say our wedding weekend last year… but it is also true. A bunch of our friends and family were in our garden in West Cork, the weather was freakishly good, and as the sun set and the music got louder I was finally able to relax and enjoy it all. Nothing had gone wrong, in fact everything had gone better than we dared hope.

Last thing you look at on your phone? I've done a pretty good job of weaning myself off my phone; leaving Twitter was a game changer. But, if it is after midnight, I will squeeze in the next day's Wordle before lights out. I sometimes wait up especially. ***Michael Segalov***

Graham Norton hosts the Eurovision Grand Final, at 8pm on 13 May on BBC One and iPlayer

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